

CONFERENCE CALL INTERVIEW WITH LIEUTENANT GENERAL MARTIN
DEMPSEY,
COMMANDER, MNSTC-I AND NATO TRAINING MISSION IN IRAQ

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TRANSCRIBED ON FRIDAY, JUNE 1, 2007

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THIS IS A RUSH TRANSCRIPT.

CMR. HOLT: (In progress) -- Holt here with Office of the Secretary of Defense
Public Affairs in Washington, D.C., sir.

GEN. DEMPSEY: How are you?

MR. HOLT: I'm doing well. Doing well.

GEN. DEMPSEY: Good.

MR. HOLT: On the line with us, Tom Bevan with Real Clear Politics, and Bill Roggio with The Fourth Rail.

So, sir, whenever you're ready with an opening statement, we'll be --

GEN. DEMPSEY: Let me put you on speaker.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir.

GEN. DEMPSEY: I got you. And yeah, my only opening statement is that I'm coming to the end of almost three years in Iraq of the last four, first as the commander, 1st Armored Division, MND Baghdad, and now almost two years at the commander of MNSTC-I and the NATO Training Mission. And so I'd be happy to talk to you about the context of everything we're doing over here or, if you prefer, the specifics of facts on the ground now. But I'd just as soon take your questions rather than me trying to capture three years of experience in 90 seconds.

So, over to you.

MR. HOLT: All right, very good, sir.

Tom, you were first on the line here, so we'll let you go first. Since there's only two of you here, we'll just kind of open this up and let the conversation flow and we'll see where we go here.

Q That's fine. General Dempsey, first of all, thank you for doing this. I think this is a great thing and it's certainly great for us, and I hope you continue to do more of these things as time progresses.

But I want to speak, see if you could address real quickly -- there was a piece in The New York Times earlier this week by Michael Kamber which got a lot of attention, got a lot of press. He interviewed some members of Delta Company, 82nd Airborne, and was talking about the picture -- he said that there was the abysmal performance of the Iraqi security forces in the eyes of U.S. soldiers, and also the negative effect that it's had on the -- that it appears to be having on U.S. troop morale.

So I wonder if you could just address that article and the issues raised in it and tell us if that, in your opinion, is an accurate reflection of what's going on there and whether you've seen any of the same sort of things.

GEN. DEMPSEY: Yeah, sure. Of course, we watch those kind of articles and internally those kind of reports of Iraqi army misconduct very carefully and then try to get to the bottom of each of them.

I mean, you know, I think it's fair to say that soldiers -- I'm talking about American soldiers who are on their second and third tours -- probably are frustrated that -

- not probably, they are frustrated -- that the Iraqi security forces are not further along and not fully prepared to address their own security requirements. And I think the instinct is absolutely understandable, I mean -- again, for young men who are on their second and third tours of duty -- young men and women on their second and third tours of duty.

I would say, though, that that is not an experience that's universal across Iraq. That particular unit was partnered with an Iraqi army unit in a particularly contested and contentious part of the battlespace. And so I think you'll find that the places where the Iraqi security forces are less developed and less ready to do things on their own are the places that are the most heavily contested. It really isn't a surprise to us.

Those places where the security situation is more stable, they actually have time to do things like train and develop, and the MiTTs are able to take the battalion staff, for example, through a planning drill and then take the Iraqi soldiers through a mission readiness exercise and then do an after-action report. But in the most contested parts of Iraq, you know, the Iraqi army is challenged simply to conduct day-to-day operations at a very high tempo and a very high threat condition.

So I think that the way I would answer your question is, the frustration is understandable. The circumstance that that company found itself fortunately is the exception rather than the rule. And as I said, we try to look into each of these situations and then deal with it as the individual situation warrants.

Q General Dempsey, Bill Roggio. Again, I also want to thank you for taking the time to speak to us.

A quick question. I'm going to follow up on that. Is -- do you have a good feel for the number of units, say, or percentage of where those type of situations occur? Would you say it's -- you know, we might experience this type of level of, you know, competence or incompetence or frustration from U.S. forces, you know, for 5 percent, 20 percent? Do you have a good feel for that?

GEN. DEMPSEY: Yeah, it's -- as you might -- I'm not dodging the question. It's extraordinarily difficult to put percentages on things like that.

But let me try to back into the answer by suggesting that the kind of things that were reflected in that article and that we see in units that perform in a sub-standard way is -- has less -- this won't surprise you, probably, but has less to do with the individual Iraqi soldier than it does to pointing out the real vulnerability in our development of the security forces, which is leaders.

As you know, we are growing new lieutenants, some of whom are actually -- we've been doing it long enough now that we've got some first lieutenants. But for the most part, you know, field grade officers, majors and above, are all recalled from the former regime.

Now, we have had the opportunity and the benefit of being able to kind of more or less hand-pick them. On average, if we do a recall -- and we've done three or four with the Ministry of Defense -- you know, you'll get a couple of thousand officers interested in coming back, and then after they go through the screening process, which includes a medical exam and screening for criminal conduct and former regime affiliations and all that, specialties -- because they try to bring back, you know, against the specific needs -- we probably only get about 20 percent of each recall that they select.

But even at that, you bring back military leaders who have been out of the fight or out of the military for, you know, three years or so, and who even when they were in the military -- some of whom had some habits that need to be overcome.

So what we find is that we have a lot more success on the military side than, for example, we do on the national police side.

So I couldn't give you a percentage, but I will say that, you know, of the -- there's 114 combat battalions in the Iraqi army now. We're on our way to 132 by the end of the year. And you know, I would say that less than 10 percent of them have the kind of leadership problems that you see reflected in the -- in that article.

But I would also admit that that doesn't mean that even the ones where they're well-led don't falter from time to time because of particular pressures, you know, based on, you know, combat losses. I mean, I remember even as the First Armored Division commander I had a particular battalion that had a particularly high casualty rate in a single event. And I actually, you know, pulled the battalion off line for a period of time to allow it to renew its spirit and do some retraining.

The Iraqi army right now doesn't have the luxury of doing that. And so there are cases where we find the -- you know, that a particular unit for a particular period of time will have those kind of problems. But again, they are certainly not the rule in the Iraqi army.

Now in the national police, you know, in the spring of 2006 we had -- well, really from the time of the Samarra bombing in February of '06 through about the early summer, we had some extraordinarily difficult times with the national police. Minister of Interior Bolani, in fact, went into a reform program. And to give you the order of magnitude of leadership problems in the national police, he has relieved, over the course of August to present, seven out of the nine brigade commanders and 14 out of 24 battalion commanders. And he's done that based on our input, the input of his own chain of command.

So I guess, I mean, I guess the message I would leave you with is that even more so than in our system -- in our system, you know, we say that the commander is responsible for everything his unit does or fails to do, and that the unit takes on the commander's personality. I mean, that's what we say about our own system. I'd say, in their system, it's even more that -- the impact of the leader is even more pronounced.

Because in their value system -- they have essentially the same values that we do, but they might be reordered a bit. You know, our value system, for example, places a greater premium on integrity and honor over, for example, obedience. We have obedience as a value, but it's not always the dominant value. It is always the dominant value in this culture, and probably will remain so, you know, for a generation or so.

So what we really try to focus on, and have actually for the last year, and it's one of our -- not one, it is our principal focus this year -- leaders and logistics. Because we recognize the impact that a leader has. So that unit that was in the paper -- I would suggest to you that were we to replace the battalion commander and a company commander, the unit would turn around almost immediately. It has that impact.

Q Can I -- I've got a good segue here from that question.

GEN. DEMPSEY: Yes.

Q As new divisions are being formed, and I see that at least there's going to be an 11th and a 12th Division. Is that correct?

GEN. DEMPSEY: Yeah, they're division headquarters. They actually are -- what we're doing is, we're improving the span of control in Baghdad by forming -- the 6th Division in Baghdad has 20 battalions assigned to it, which exceeds their span of control. So we're going to put a division headquarters on each side of the river and give them half.

Q Okay, so but when you have new -- you had mentioned, we have another -- is it -- 16 battalions.

GEN. DEMPSEY: 24 battalions this year.

Q 24 additional battalions, so as we -- as the experienced cadres are pulled from the existing units to man the new battalions, do you expect the number of lead battalions to drop? And do you expect more problems like reported in this New York Times article?

GEN. DEMPSEY: It exacerbates our leadership challenge, and it exacerbates some of the logistics challenges. Now the mitigation for that is that we are deeply involved with the minister of defense right now in finding ways to either abbreviate the pin-on time for certain ranks so that, for example, we can take some of these new leaders we've been generating, get them promoted at a more accelerated rate, consistent with their experiences. I mean, you know, they're living a lifetime of experiences on a daily basis here, particularly in Baghdad. And so we think it's prudent and feasible for promotion timelines to be somewhat abbreviated from what would be a normal peacetime timeline.

The other thing we're doing is, we're encouraging him, and he is inclined to support this at this point, to reach out to university graduates, so young men with college educations, and then give them an OCS kind of experience.

Right now it takes us nine months to grow a brand new second lieutenant. They go through the -- we have four military academies. We produce about 2,400 brand new lieutenants every year in a nine-month curriculum. It's the Sandhurst model, actually. And so what we're going to try to do is encourage the minister to reach out to college graduates, give them something between a four- and six-month OCS experience and see if we can increase the through-put of new leaders into the system, because really that's what we need is a new generation of leaders.

Q Thank you, General.

Q General, I wonder -- if it's my turn again -- (chuckles) --

MR. HOLT: Yeah, absolutely, Tom.

Q Great. I wonder if you could address the statement by General Odierno yesterday about reaching out to insurgents to sign -- you know, seeking to sign cease-fire agreements.

GEN. DEMPSEY: Well, I can't speak to the -- there are any number of -- let me tell you about how I fit into all that. There's any number of -- and we broadly call them "engagement activities" not unique to engaging with tribal groups, but it's really engagement with any group that will agree that the greatest threat to Iraq is al Qaeda, and therefore, agree to not necessarily support us, but to fight al Qaeda. So there's an entire structure in the embassy and MNF-I that deals with engagement activities.

Now, where we fit in is oftentimes the -- part of the agreement, the local tribal or, you know, political agreement, is that there would be the possibility of young men signing up either for the legitimate, validated Iraqi security forces, or in some cases finding way to have provisional groups of what might more broadly be described as, you know, neighborhood watch or route watch or local district watches, but with the -- some minimal amount of training and oversight by the coalition forces and the legitimate security forces. So I do get involved in those kind of agreements, when they're able to strike them, because there's generally some aspect of security forces related to it. So that's pretty much what I get involved in. I really don't have any visibility on cease-fires or any agreements that would be anything like that.

Q Okay, I'll ask a question. This sort of segues from there. For the provincial security forces that are being formed up in Anbar province -- that are actually formed in Anbar province, is the government of Iraq -- are they looking to recruit from the Awakening -- or from these provincial police forces into the national police forces? You know, the last report we had seen was that the Shi'a percentage in the INP was up 85 to

90 percent. Are they still working to get these numbers down to make it more of a -- you know, to make a non-secular police force, so to speak?

GEN. DEMPSEY: Yeah. In fact, a very timely question. We had a national police summit a week ago, and Minister Bolani attended, the national police commander attended; we had broad coalition membership there, the MOI director of training, MOI director of personnel and administration, so on and so forth. And there is a recognition that the national police are an important cog in the mechanism of security here, especially, you know, as provinces go to this thing called provincial Iraqi control, the ability of the minister of Interior to project police power across provinces increases in importance, not decreases. And so -- but we've got a ways to go. I mean, it is something between -- it's right around 85 percent Shi'a right now, and of course, everyone recognized at that conference that that presents the wrong image.

Now, we did not come to an agreement on how to get from where we are to where we need to be, which is something probably more like 70 percent, I would say -- 65 to 70 percent Shi'a.

Now, so -- but there is an effort supported by the minister of Interior to ensure that the leaders of the national police are at least diverse, and that the rank and file will be diversified over time through a replenishment program. We've got a goal of producing about 7,000 to 8,000 new national policemen through the remainder of this year at three or four of the 13 police academies, and we are working with the MOI to try to recruit Sunni into the national police.

By the way, that is part of the problem. Because it's sort of a circular argument that I'm faced with at this point, because the national police are seen as so Shi'a-dominant, there isn't much appetite for the Sunni to enter the national police, and so we have a bit of an image problem and a very real recruiting problem.

I think our answer to that, by the way, may be to disperse some of the national police units out of Baghdad and into places where they could then do some local recruiting. But anyway, that's premature. We haven't reached that point yet, and they're very much contributing to the Baghdad security plan, at least between now and the end of the summer.

Q Well, what about using existing provincial security forces and assigning them as a national police battalion or something to that effect?

GEN. DEMPSEY: Well, the issue with army and national police is they have to agree, as part of the terms of service, that they are nationally deployable. I mean, they have to agree to go where the unit's told to go. That has been a problem for us in Al Anbar province in particular. And so there was a time not so long ago that we were having extraordinary difficulty recruiting into the Iraqi army in Al Anbar province, that there's two divisions of army in Al Anbar, as you know -- the 1st Division in eastern Al Anbar and the 7th in western Al Anbar.

Now, the way we managed to overcome that particular hurdle in the near term is that, with the MOD's consent, we have expanded the Iraqi training base, so there's now a regional training center or soon to be a regional training center affiliated with each division, and we've allowed local commanders to recruit locally. And the deal that the contract causes these young men to make is that they will -- they are able to choose their division of choice upon entry. They have to agree that if the division is deployed someplace or their particular battalion that they'll go with it, and -- but that they can stay in their division of choice for the first two years, and then, upon either re-enlistment -- then they would be reassigned throughout the force.

What that did was it allowed some of the young Sunni men in Al Anbar to have a certain degree of confidence that they would be serving in a unit in Al Anbar. Now, interestingly, we did take the 4th Brigade of the 1st Division out of Ramadi as part of the Baghdad security plan -- they're currently in Baghdad, and we didn't have any trouble with them moving, even those young men who had signed up to be in the 1st Division.

So, you know, this is one of those evolutionary changes in an army that is -- you know, that on the one hand wants to see itself as a national deployable army but is faced with some very real recruiting challenges, that they then, you know, ask us for help in creatively overcoming but without giving up the core competency of it being a national army.

So I mean, that's kind of -- so the point about the local police, provisional police in Al Anbar, they wouldn't have any desire to do that. But if over time they did -- you know, if six or eight or nine months from now -- then I think there would be a great deal of interest in having them become national police. But the national police, as a core competency, have to be willing to move around the country.

Q Thank you.

Q General, I wonder if you could step back for a minute and just sort of provide sort of a broader sense of where things -- you know, where things are headed. Like you said, you've been there two years now -- three out of the last four years. So could you tell us a little bit, you know, how things have changed over your course there, how we're doing things differently, you know, whether there's sense of urgency that -- you know, because part of this is sort of racing against the political perceptions and the public opinion here at home, and everyone's looking forward to September as sort of a benchmark for, you know, progress. Do you terms in that -- do you view things in those terms? I wonder if you could just sort of address the whole sense of progress there.

GEN. DEMPSEY: Yeah. Actually, I think you've answered the question as well or better than I could, I mean, by noting the balance -- well, let me say this. What's changed is that we -- there is definitely an emerging sense of sovereignty on the part of the Iraqi government reflected in the conduct of daily operations within the ministries and an emerging sense at the national level that they are -- that they're ready to take

responsibility for their own security that is -- that has to be deftly balanced by us in helping them understand that the details of actually taking over responsibility and the requirement to resource the forces in the field -- I mean, it's one thing for the ministry to say, "I'm ready; I got it," and quite another than to take responsibility and accomplish the mission by providing the resources to the fielded forces.

I guess, stated another way, I think that there's progress at every level. There's progress at the tactical level in the performance of units, not, you know, irreversible progress, I think, yet, but progress.

There's progress at the national level in these institutions -- you know, the training base, the intelligence architecture, the communications architecture, the logistics architecture, budget execution. You know, there's progress in all of those sectors of this larger enterprise. But those -- but they're not connected yet.

So for example, you might have a reasonable ammunition depot with reasonable processes that provide ammunition to fielded units when they are requested, and then you might -- at the other end, you might have a reporting system and a requisitioning process that is immature and ineffective, and so you've got a disconnect. Or conversely, you might have a system that's working at the tactical level, but when it tries to plug in at the national level, the national level is not ready to deal with, like promotions, for example.

So you know, there is this -- I think there's some frustration that this has not all kind of neatly come together. But I would say that, you know, the challenges we're faced are, I think, pretty much the challenges I'd want to be faced with at this point, meaning we do have Iraqi leaders at every level who want to take responsibility. I can't imagine being faced with the alternative, you know, if we -- we'd be having a far different conversation if they didn't want any part of this.

By the way, every once in a while, you will run into a leader who says, "No, no, thanks." (Chuckles.) You know, "Why don't you keep doing that, because you do it so much better than us."

But those guys are few and far between. Most -- for the most part, we tend to -- you know, we tend to find they want responsibility. They perhaps don't completely understand the breadth and cope and depth of the responsibility. But things like the Baghdad security plan oftentimes illuminate for us, you know, the things we've got to do in the future.

I'll give you some things, though, that make -- you know, you say how do I see things here after two years. I mean, you know, this is the first year that the Iraqi government will spend more on its security of its own money than we have. In the past, we've out-spent them every year consistently through my Iraqi Security Forces Fund. And this year they will out-spend us on a scale of 2-to-1. They'll spend about \$9 billion this year, if we can help them execute their budget, which I think we can. And then we'll end up spending about \$4.5 billion this year of Iraqi Security Forces Fund.

And as a result of that, I have also noticed that, you know, when they now are spending their money and they're making the procurement of weapons and they're doing construction and they are responsible for certain processes, they take it a lot more seriously, to tell you the truth. I suppose that's just a blinding flash of human nature. But when they buy humvees, they're absolutely anal about where are they, where are the serial numbers, who's assigned for them, are they being maintained. And when we talk to them about the humvees we've issued, you know, sometimes it just doesn't have the same sense of urgency.

So getting them to -- especially at the ministry level -- to see themselves as accountable to the soldier in the field has been a very tough, long fight, a different kind of fight than a fight in the streets, but a fight. But we're almost there. We're almost to the point where the ministry sees itself responsible for the well-being of the soldiers, and we're almost to the point where the soldiers believe that the ministry is loyal to them. And I think when you ask me, where is the tipping point, I think that's the tipping point, in my line of work; it's when do the fielded forces believe that the ministry is acting on their behalf and providing the resources they need, and when is the ministry feeling that - - when does someone in the ministry wake up in the morning and feel themselves responsible for making sure every Iraqi soldier is fed. And it's been very long and it's been, you know, uneven progress, but we're about there, I think. And I think by the end of the year we will be there.

Q General Dempsey, we've seen the evidence of the logistical support for the Iraqi army. Where do the logistics for the national police come from?

GEN. DEMPSEY: Well, the national police -- we are building with them -- we probably ended up about a year behind on logistics for the police, but it wasn't due to a lack of effort or enthusiasm. The national police only this year were codified in what the MOI calls its "structure law." In other words, the Council of Representatives approved structure for the Ministry of Interior that included the national police. There was no such thing as the national police prior to about the spring of '05. And they stood up, as you remember, as commandos and public order battalions, as they called them in those days. And then we helped merge them into this thing called the national police. It wasn't captured in the structure law, therefore it wasn't budgeted for. And so we very much -- they were living pretty much a hand-to-mouth existence, and mostly through coalition support.

What's changed is that there is an approved structure law, there's an approved budget for them now, there's an approved logistics concept. And in the case of the national police, it looks very much like a military logistics system. You know, they'll have -- and have now, we're building deployable logistics battalions for them, increasing their capacity to carry and store fuel. They have contracted life support. They've got an ammunition system that is recognizable as a military ammunition system.

Now as you know, the local police are another matter entirely. Most things in the local police are centrally procured and distributed, and then decentrally maintained and accounted for, and that has had its own challenges. Because you know, there still is in this country -- well, I mean, they've only been really running the country for a little more than a year-and-a-half now, I guess.

But they have -- you know, there's been some fits and starts about central authorities versus provincial authorities. And those fits and starts play out in ways like, you know, who can assign and who can select the provincial director of police; who's responsible for maintaining and life support for the provincial police academies. I mean, you know, these are the things that don't make much headlines but are the hard nuts and bolts of running a government. And as these things have been worked over the past couple of years, there has been progress.

I mean, you know, my first year here, we were paying and feeding -- well, we were doing everything for the Iraq, at that time, Civil Defense Corps and then National Guard and then the nation army. And you know, now we've got -- there's plenty of places where they are self-reliant at the ministerial level, and there's plenty of places where they still rely on us for help.

MR. HOLT: Okay, we're out of time here, unfortunately, some great conversation. Anything to add, any follow-ups before we close out here?

Q No, I'd just like to say, thank you, again, to the general for taking the time to do this. It's been great.

Q Yeah, General, I really appreciate your time. Thanks for your -- thanks for answering the questions. Appreciate it.

GEN. DEMPSEY: Well, my pleasure, and I -- you know, as I said, I'm leaving here, in fact, a week from Sunday. And then I'll take a little leave and I'll end up as the deputy commanding general at Central Command. So I'll still have not only a great deal of interest but a great deal of work to do in trying to, I guess, from a regional perspective at that point, but make sure that we can accomplish this mission over here.

But you know, I guess what I would leave you with is, the Iraqis haven't given up on themselves, and I hope we don't give up on them.

Q General, will you be in Florida, or will you be in the Middle East?

GEN. DEMPSEY: (Laughs.) Well, I don't know. That's a great question. And Mrs. Dempsey asked me that question when I got assigned.

Q (Laughs.) No doubt she did.

GEN. DEMPSEY: I think for the most part I will be -- well, I mean, whenever General Fallon travels, I'm certainly going to be in Tampa. I'm sure, though, that I'll do a bit of travel myself, but that will be up to him. And I think, though, that at least in the early months I probably will have to learn the ropes at Central Command in Tampa.

Q I wish you the best of luck, sir.

GEN. DEMPSEY: Thanks very much.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir, and hopefully we'll have a chance to re-engage on one of these in your new position.

GEN. DEMPSEY: I'm always available.

MR. HOLT: All right, look forward to it. Thank you very much, sir.

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